Unit .32

Session .01

The Church Is Sent to Trust God

Scripture

Acts 12:1-17

1 About that time King Herod violently attacked some who
belonged to the church, **2** and he executed James, John's
brother, with the sword. **3** When he saw that it pleased the
Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival
of Unleavened Bread. **4** After the arrest, he put him in
prison and assigned four squads of four soldiers each to
guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after
the Passover. **5** So Peter was kept in prison, but the church
was praying fervently to God for him. **6** When Herod
was about to bring him out for trial, that very night
Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two
soldiers, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the
prison. **7** Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a
light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke
him up and said, "Quick, get up!" And the chains fell off
his wrists. **8** "Get dressed," the angel told him, "and put
on your sandals." And he did. "Wrap your cloak around
you," he told him, "and follow me." **9** So he went out and
followed, and he did not know that what the angel did was
really happening, but he thought he was seeing a vision.
10 After they passed the first and second guards, they
came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened
to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street,
and suddenly the angel left him. **11** When Peter came to
himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord
has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's grasp and
from all that the Jewish people expected." **12** As soon as
he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother
of John who was called Mark, where many had assembled
and were praying. **13** He knocked at the door of the
outer gate, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer.
14 She recognized Peter's voice, and because of her joy,
she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that
Peter was standing at the outer gate. **15** "You're out of
your mind!" they told her. But she kept insisting that it
was true, and they said, "It's his angel." **16** Peter, however,
kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and
saw him, they were amazed. **17** Motioning to them with
his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord
had brought him out of the prison. "Tell these things to
James and the brothers," he said, and he left and went to
another place.

Intro Options

Main Point:
God responds to prayer even when we have difficulty seeing Him at work.

Option 1

Your students are writers for a feel-good TV studio. This studio has come up with a show called The Need Genie. It's about a genie who goes around hearing people's wishes. The catch is that this genie doesn't give people what they wish for; instead, the genie looks past the wish to give people what they actually need. For example, a teenager might ask for a girlfriend, but the genie sees what the young man really needs is a fulfilling relationship with his family, so the genie orchestrates events to develop that relationship.

Your students, alone or in pairs, are to write brief synopses for episodes for the show. Maybe on one show an athlete wishes to win the state championship, but the athlete really needs to feel achievement by [redacted] another episode, maybe a high school senior wishes to get into a really [redacted] he really needs is to be satisfied with his work effort, regardless of what school he gets into.

Give your students some time to make their synopses and then see what they come up with. We've all had times when what we wanted wasn't what we needed. Today, we'll look at an episode where some Christians, like Peter, recognized God's work in a time of rescue, while others disbelieved God because the answer to their prayers looked different than what they were expecting (just like the genie's answer looked different from what the wishers were hoping for).

Your students should pretend they work for a Christian mental/emotional health agency. They've been hired to help people know how to deal with fear. They should make posters (alone or in pairs) or radio commercials that give two or three bad ways and two or three good ways to deal with fear. Depending on your group, you may want to try to keep things light. They could make their bad ways to deal with fear humorous: for example, if you're afraid of the dark, a way to deal with that fear is to start a firefly collection. Coming up with specific examples of fear and how to respond to them may be helpful in catalyzing their ideas.

Let the students prepare their posters and ads and then share them. How many suggested prayer? We'll see in today's lesson that fervent prayer is one way the church responds to fearful circumstances.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 12:1-5.

Both Jewish and Roman leaders failed to stop an ever-increasing number of people from turning to Jesus. Like Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, the Jewish and Roman leaders saw the multiplication of the people of God as a threat. The Jews took advantage of their political influence—an influence the apostles did not have—in an attempt to defeat the apostles by force. Ironically, it seems they learned nothing from the crucifixion and resurrection events.

Imagine the fear the early Christians must have been feeling. One of their most prominent leaders was executed, and another is in prison awaiting the same fate. With no political power, they throw themselves upon the mercy and power of God. Like the children of Israel at the Red Sea, their only hope is that God would make a way where there was no way.

- **What are some unhealthy ways we respond to crisis and difficulty?**

Our natural response to crisis is always carnal. We typically freak out, get angry and bitter, doubt God, sulk in self-pity, or go into problem-solving mode. When things are out of our control, there is a tendency to turn to unhealthy habits for a sense of control and comfort. We might use food, social media, binge watching a TV series, or immersion into a gaming world as an escape from reality to seek comfort. We may retract from others, or we may turn to relationships as a kind of savior they were never meant to be.

- **What can we learn about responding to crisis from the believers in this story?**

The church in Jerusalem shows us how to respond to crisis by turning to the God who reigns. When our lives are out of control, God is still in control. When the scales of justice are unbalanced, God reigns in righteousness. God is not bound by human limitations, governments, or even the laws of nature. Though, at times, it seems that we can do nothing, God can do anything. Fervent prayer is an action that shows that we truly believe in such a God.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 48, DDG)

Prayer and Providence

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that "prayer changes things," and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our hearts so that our will comes into conformity with His.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God responds to prayer even when we have difficulty seeing Him at work.

Acts 12

12:1-5. "Having won points with the Jews by the execution of James, Agrippa then moved against the chief of the apostles, Peter, arresting him and putting him in prison…It would have been after the holy days had ended that Agrippa would have brought Peter forth for public trial and surely also for execution (v.4)…While Peter waited in prison, the Christians used their most effective means of assistance. They prayed continually for him (v.5)."[1]

"Fervent prayer is motivated by love and deep concern and is offered with enthusiasm, feeling, and faith. This is not a casual listing of requests, but prayer that flows from the heart over a pressing need."[2]

"Thou art coming to a King, Large petitions with thee bring; For his grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much."[3]

Activity

The main idea from today's lesson was that God always answers His people's prayers, even if we don't always recognize His work. Alone or in small groups, your students should create short rhymes to capture this idea. Their goal is to create short, theologically-rich jingles that they can sing to themselves or their close friends to bolster their faith in times when we are tempted to disbelieve His deliverance. For example:

- When God doesn't seem to be coming through
- I know His love to me remains true.
- The cross shows He is too loving and too wise
- To disappoint, even if I can't see the answer with my eyes.

They might alter the lyrics to a popular song or a commercial jingle. Let them share their jingles. Give some examples of places and times where these jingles might be helpful in real life, or even for evangelism.

1. John B. Polhill, Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary), vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011).
2. Charles Stanley, "Prayer That Moves God," intouch.org, 2017, https://www.intouch.org/-/media/sermon-notes/prayer-that-moves-god.ashx.
3. Downing, Frank U. Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare. Chicago Music Co., Chicago, monographic, 1885. Notated Music. https://www.loc.gov/item/sm1885.03117/.

In Defense (p. 50, DDG)

One apostle is martyred while the other receives a miracle, but surely the early Christians prayed for James, just as they prayed for Peter. So, are we to conclude that they lacked faith when James was in prison? That God wasn't hearing their prayers before? Our response to both of those options should be a resounding, "No." This is a story where we find that God is not like a genie, and prayer is not us attempting to twist God's arm to do what He has not willed. Rather, prayer brings our will before God, with earnest plea, and then surrenders to His rule and wisdom.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 12:6-11.

Have you ever had a dream that was so vivid it felt real? Peter had an experience that felt like a dream, but it was real. Perhaps he thought it was a vision because of how unlikely (and humanly impossible) his escape would have been. Regardless of why, Peter was initially unaware of just how real this miracle was. And yet, the miracle does not merely happen to him, but with him. There were five things Peter was instructed to do in verses 7-8: to get up, to get dressed, to put his sandals on, to put a cloak on, and to follow the angel.

There are some things that only God can do, but He still gives us a role to play in His miraculous work. God almost always works through people to accomplish His will, whether through prayer like in verse 5 or through simple obedience in verses 7-8.

- **What are some simple ways you can obey God that could make a big difference in your life and the lives of others?**

Hudson Taylor once wrote, "A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing."[4] The angel didn't command Peter to do extraordinary things; Peter simply had to stand and walk. It was God who did the chain-breaking, prison opening miracle. God doesn't need you to perform a miracle—He can do it Himself, for He is God—but He does want you to obey when He calls you to do something.

Jesus has performed the miracle of setting us free from the binding power of sin, but are we walking in His freedom? Jesus has given us access to Heaven's throne, but are we going to God in prayer? Jesus has done what only He could do, but we have a responsibility to do what He gives us the power to do.

Read Acts 12:12-17.

When something great happens in your life, who do you tell? Who do you immediately call or text or go see? Typically, we want to tell our family and closest friends. Where do you go when you're in need or in danger? Typically, it's the same people. For Peter, those people were his church family. He had just experienced a miraculous release, but in a very real sense, he wasn't completely out of harm's way just yet. So, he turned to his church to share what God has done.

- **What can we do as a group/church to be a safe place and refuge for each other when someone is in need?**

For both the good times and the bad times, our goal should be to create a church culture where our church family is the go-to people in our lives. We must create a culture of love, dependability, loyalty, and care that makes our church a place of refuge spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

- **What can we learn from Rhoda's example as a young person in the church?**

Rhoda was a young servant who was not in a position of authority. She may have thought her job wasn't all that important, but God used her to accomplish His purposes. Regardless of your age or position, God can use you. She wasn't powerful, but she was persistent with the truth. As you commit yourself to the truth and commit to use whatever voice you have to speak up for what is true, God will use your life regardless of your age or position.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God responds to prayer even when we have difficulty seeing Him at work.

Acts 12

12:6-11. Neither Herod nor the guards had reckoned on divine intervention, and presumably it would take nothing less than that to extricate Peter from this situation."[5]

"Obviously, this was not Peter's escape. It was rather his deliverance."[6]

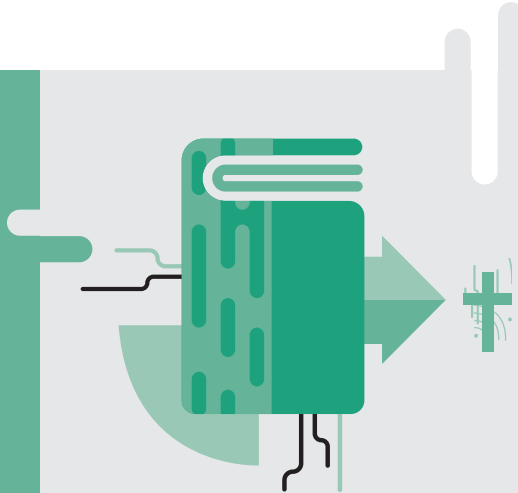
12:12-17. Darrell Bock notes, "The community is praying, not knowing that God has already answered their prayers." As we pray, God is at work behind the scenes. Even when we haven't yet realized what God is doing, we can rest in knowing that God is already working to produce His will in our lives.[7]

12:17. "The James mentioned here is the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3), who later figured as the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; 21:18); Paul regarded him, along with Peter and John, as one of the three 'pillars' of the church (Gal. 2:9). He had been a witness of a resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7), and hence Paul recognized him as an apostle (Gal. 1:19). It seems probable that, from an early stage, he was one of the leaders in the church, and at some point he took Peter's place as the recognized leader." [8]

4. Gavin Ortlund, Twitter post, April 9, 2020, 10:43 p.m., https://twitter.com/gavinortlund/status/1248456497421406208
5. Ben Witherington, The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
6. John B. Polhill, Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary), vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011)
7. Darrell L. Bock, Acts (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids (Mich.), MI: Baker Academic, 2007).
8. I. Howard Marshall, Acts (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP Numbered)) (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

(p. , DDG) Christ Connection

When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for his release. God delivered Peter miraculously, but the church failed to believe he had been rescued at first. In a similar way, Jesus taught His disciples that He would die and come back to life, but they, too, failed to believe at first. When they saw and experienced the resurrected Savior, their faith increased.



SENT TO TRUST GOD

God responds to prayer even when we have difficulty seeing Him at work.

JESUS CONNECTION

When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the church prayed fervently for him, and God miraculously delivered Peter. Though God does not promise to give us everything we pray for, He does call us to pray constantly (1 Thess. 5:17) because Jesus stands before God as our faithful high priest who appeals to God on our behalf in Heaven (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

LIFEWISE QUALITY

PERSISTENCE – Repeatedly practicing a good behavior until it's a habit.

HEAD

How did God deliver Peter from prison and possible death?

How did the servant Rhoda respond to Peter's escape differently from the other disciples?

HEART

God delivered Peter from prison, but James was put to death. It is normal to feel discouraged when it seems God is working in some situations, but not others. How can this story encourage you to persist in prayer, even when you can't see God working?

How might your prayers change if you remember that God is always listening when you talk to Him?

HANDS

Write down three ways you would like to grow as a person. Use the categories below or create your own.

- Character trait (contentment, love, responsibility, forgiveness, etc.)
- Habit (telling the truth, eating right, speaking respectfully to others, going to church, etc.)
- Skill (academic, arts, sports, etc.)
- Hobby (photography, skateboarding, writing, etc.)

Choose the area from your list that you would most like to grow in. Write out three specific actions you can take every day this week to grow in this area. Pray and ask God to help you be persistent in following through with these steps.